

IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
FOR THE MIDDLE DISTRICT OF PENNSYLVANIA

JOHN COOPER

Plaintiff

vs.

LT. JASON SEEBA, *et al.*,

Defendants

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CIVIL NO. 1:CV-16-2073

(Judge Caldwell)

MEMORANDUM

I. *Introduction*

Presently before the court is plaintiff, John Cooper's, motion for appointment of counsel. (ECF No. 4). For the reasons that follow the motion will be denied.

II. *Discussion*

This is a civil action, not a criminal one. Hence the plaintiff has no constitutional or statutory right to appointed counsel. *Montgomery v. Pinchak*, 294 F.3d 492, 498 (3d Cir. 2002). Nor can the court compel a lawyer to represent an indigent plaintiff. *Tabron v. Grace*, 6 F.3d 147, 153 n.1 (3d Cir. 1993). Rather, representation for an indigent is governed by 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(1) which only provides that the court "may request an attorney to represent any person unable to afford counsel." (emphasis added).

A district court has broad discretion under 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(1) in deciding whether to seek counsel, *Montgomery*, 294 F.3d at 498, and the decision can be made at

any point of the litigation. *Id.* at 503-04 (“Either the Magistrate Judge or the District Court should have recognized Montgomery’s difficulties as they became increasingly apparent and, in light of them, reconsidered Montgomery’s motion for appointment of counsel.”).

The Third Circuit has provided guidance for the exercise of the district court’s discretion. At the threshold, the court must decide whether the plaintiff’s case “has some arguable merit in fact and law.” *Id.* at 499 (quoting *Parham v. Johnson*, 126 F.3d 454, 457 (3d Cir. 1997)). A court need not appoint counsel “if the indigent’s chances of success on the merits are extremely slim.” *Id.* at 500 (quoting *Hodge v. Police Officers*, 802 F.2d 58, 60 (2d Cir. 1986))(internal quotation marks and brackets omitted). If the threshold requirement is met, the court then considers a number of factors established by the Third Circuit to determine whether it is appropriate to request counsel for an indigent party. These factors include: (1) the plaintiff’s ability to present his own case; (2) the difficulty of the particular legal issues; (3) the degree to which factual investigation will be necessary and the ability of the plaintiff to pursue investigation; (4) the plaintiff’s capacity to retain counsel on his own behalf; (5) the extent to which a case is likely to turn on credibility determinations; and (6) whether the case will require testimony from expert witnesses. *Tabron*, 6 F.3d at 155-57.

“[V]olunteer lawyer time is a precious commodity, *Montgomery*, *supra*, 294 F.3d at 499, so the district court’s “broad statutory discretion” should be exercised “discerningly.” *Id.* at 505 n.10. However, if the case “appears to have merit” and “most of the . . . *Tabron* factors have been met, the Third Circuit “instruct[s]” that the district court

“should make every attempt to obtain counsel.” *Id.* at 505 (quoting *Parham*, 126 F.3d at 461)(internal quotation marks omitted).

We have only recently screened Cooper’s Complaint and directed service on the named defendants. Until the defendants respond, the court will not be able to fully assess the threshold question of the arguable factual and legal merit of Plaintiff’s claims for the purpose of appointing him counsel. Thus far Cooper’s Complaint and other filings have been legible and direct with his presentation of facts. To the extent that Cooper’s request for counsel is based on the fact of his incarceration or his indigent status, these facts do not warrant the appointment of counsel given this court’s liberal construction of *pro se* pleadings. *Haines v. Kerner*, 404 U.S. 519, 92 S.Ct. 594, 30 L.Ed.2d 652 (1972). While Cooper states that he suffers from post-traumatic stress after he was attacked by his cellmate, and that he is bi-polar and takes psychotropic medications, he does not provide the court with any evidence to suggest he is incompetent as he claims. (ECF Nos. 4 and 5). At this point in the litigation, there is no evidence that any prejudice will befall Cooper in the absence of court-appointed counsel. Consequently, his request for counsel will be denied.

An appropriate order follows.

/s/ William W. Caldwell
William W. Caldwell
United States District Judge

Date: April 25, 2017